



Re-thinking sustainability: the case for sustainable nutrition



Sustainability is key to fixing a broken food system. But its scope should go beyond environmental issues and include the economic sustainability and nutritional outcomes of the food we produce.

2050 is a date which comes up frequently in every debate about food systems: it's the year when the world population is estimated to reach 9.8 billion people. And the question that always follows is: how are we going to feed all of them?

It is my belief that our current food system is broken and that we have to fundamentally change the way we grow, distribute and eat food. Key to this, is the need to move away from a food system based solely on increasing yields with less impact (what I would call a 'productivist' approach), to one that reduces environmental impacts whilst optimising health and nutritional outcomes. When people think of sustainability, many associate it with environmental issues. This of course is entirely justified, considering that we live in an increasingly resource-constrained world, where global climate change, biodiversity loss and increasing water scarcity are a reality.

Expanding the scope of sustainability

However, feeding a planet of almost 10 billion people is such a complex challenge that we have to consider two other fundamental pillars of sustainability. One is the economic aspect. Many of us, particularly in parts of the developed world, have become used to relatively cheap food. Its true cost, however, is not reflected in the price we pay for it, and it's often borne at the expense of farmers and food workers, who are forced to accept low prices and wages. It also comes at a cost in terms of what we are paying for healthcare to fight the global obesity epidemic and associated non-communicable diseases.

The other essential aspect is the social side of sustainability, which is about food that improves people's lives. Key to this is nutrition: it's no longer good enough to just produce more food more sustainably. We need to ensure we focus more on the production of nutrient-dense foods in order to optimise nutritional and health outcomes.

I call this expanded concept 'sustainable nutrition', which recognises we need to change methods of production and our own consumption patterns, thinking in terms of the number of people fed, as opposed to the tonnes of food produced. It's characterised by a number of principles including:

1. A regenerative approach to agriculture – One where agriculture puts more back into the environment and society than it takes out;
2. More plants in our diets - They are the perfect example of food with high nutritional value, lower environmental impact and better health outcomes;
3. Reduce consumption of foods high in sugars, salt and saturated fats, which provide empty calories with no nutritional

value.

4. Reduce food waste - Today, we already produce 30%-40% more calories than necessary but one third of all food grown globally is wasted somewhere across the food value chain;
5. Go for sustainable-labelled products – There are a plethora of labels in the market which reflect differing values and beliefs of consumers.

Reconnecting people with food

For sustainable nutrition to become mainstream, we have to reconnect people with food. In an increasingly globalised society, with the majority of us living within cities, it's easy to forget where our food comes from and how it is produced. It's this type of disconnection that is, I believe, resulting in unsustainable behaviours, like food waste, the obesity epidemic and the unrealistic expectation that food should become cheaper and cheaper.

Consumers, on their part, are already showing a clear desire to reconnect with food. Many are concerned about animal welfare, fair trade or organic agriculture. However, their good intentions are often met with two types of problems.

One is that whilst sustainability can be high on their agenda, when it comes to choosing which product to place in their shopping baskets, decisions are based on cost and health, rather than sustainability concerns.

In my view, unsustainable food shouldn't be a choice at all: retailers and manufacturers should only be offering sustainable products. Consumers, however, will have to start thinking about the true cost of food and be prepared to pay more for it, at least in parts of the developed world. That shift would send a clear message to the market and drive the demand for sustainable food, without the need for consumers to make a conscious decision.

The second factor pushing consumers away from sustainable products is the confusion on food labelling. There are too many different sustainability and organic schemes and standards, and ingredients lists are full of e-numbers and other technical terms. Certain added ingredients can have recognised manufacturing or health benefits, but consumers don't understand what they read, so they're naturally wary of them.

The desire for transparency

It all comes down to an issue of transparency and traceability: consumers need to be confident and sure of what chemical compounds are actually in that e-number, what the benefits and the pros and cons are. This lack of transparency has created a certain mistrust of Big Business, particularly in the western world and, increasingly, in parts of the developing world.

The clean label movement is a clear sign of consumers' desire for more transparency. It's growing along with a localisation movement, where people want to source food more locally within shorter supply chains. This way they can be assured of where and how it is grown.

A bigger role for governments

Over the next few years, governments and businesses will need to think about not only production efficiencies, but how they can influence consumer behaviours, if we are really to ensure the food we eat results in improvements to planetary and human health outcomes.

This starts by adopting an attitude of ultra-transparency and being really open in terms of what goes into food and why. Although all that information would not fit on the packaging, it should be made accessible, so everyone can find out more if they wish to.

The labelling aspect, however, is only one small piece of the puzzle. Governments need to play a significant role across many areas, if we want to create a truly sustainable food system and deliver the ambition as set out under the Sustainable Development Goals (a global framework for sustainable development which most countries have signed). This includes the use of agricultural subsidies, to support the horticulture sector for example, taxation, procurement policies or dietary advice that would encourage citizens to incorporate more and more plants into their diets.

Alternative plant-based and land-based proteins

Retailers and manufacturers also have a vital role to play. It starts with the need to implement sustainability strategies and embed them across their organisations, with sustainable nutrition at their heart. A whole host of opportunities will emerge as a result, including how they can innovate in ways that maximise the nutritional content of foods at minimum environmental costs.

One example is the emergence of innovation to find more sustainable ways to produce proteins. This is already happening on two fronts. One is plant-based proteins, which can cater for the wider market of meat reducers rather than vegans and vegetarians. Tesco in the UK has recently employed a director of plant-based innovation, while many of the world's leading food manufacturers I've been speaking to have R&D teams working to embed more plant-based proteins within composite foodstuffs. Other proteins are showing great potential as alternatives to soya for the animal feed sector.

Change is possible, although not easy

Feeding almost 10 billion people with healthy, nutritious, sustainably-produced foods will be one of the key challenges of the 21st century and whilst it won't be easy, it is entirely possible. It's going to require radically different business models and new collaborations between business, governments and the civil society, which are already starting to emerge. Sustainable nutrition is a powerful lens for all those working in the food system, which will enable organisations to identify strategies leading to action and innovation. Through the lens of sustainable nutrition, I believe we can start reframing how we produce, consume, and value food, and get to the 2050 appointment on time.

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For the last 20years, Mark has worked with a wide variety of organisations, including WWF and Forum for the Future where he was instrumental in developing their approaches to sustainable diets and sustainable nutrition.

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